

Coverage of Records for Electronic Serials in the CONSER Database

A discussion paper prepared for CONSER policy and operations representatives

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Purpose

CONSER has been dealing with issues related to the cataloging of electronic serials for over a decade. Some of our decisions have been pragmatic and somewhat unconventional, such as the “single-record” approach. We are now about to embark on a new adventure as we seek to define the “aggregator-neutral” record that will be used for the various electronic versions of serials.¹ The many issues associated with this record—what to use as the source of the description and how to describe the serial—will be discussed at the upcoming CONSER Operations meeting May 1-2. The purpose of this paper is to address the subject of how this record will be applied by CONSER participants.

The fundamental questions are:

- **What kind of access is needed for electronic serials?**
- **Which serials should be included in the CONSER database?**
- **Who will create these records?**
- **How will they be maintained?**

This paper is being sent to both operations and policy-level representatives. While there is no longer a CONSER Policy Committee, it was agreed at the time of the merger with PCC, that policy representatives could be polled from time-to-time on matters of concern to CONSER. Since this issue addresses some fundamental policies for CONSER and its member institutions, it is important that input be gained from all levels within the program. The paper lays out the basic issues for discussion within CONSER institutions prior to the May meeting. Representatives should come to the meeting prepared to speak for their institution as to the various issues and questions addressed. While no formal written response is required, you are always free to contact me and I would welcome the feedback (jhir@loc.gov or 202-707-5947).

Background

The fact that CONSER has a discrete database has always been a defining element of the Program. When CONSER had its own strategic plan, the mission statement began with:

“In support of the use of serial literature, the Cooperative Online Serials Program facilitates identification of and access to serials by cooperatively building and

¹ This decision was made based on overwhelming results of a 2002 survey and later responses from CONSER to the proposal for “Option B+.”

maintaining a database of authoritative bibliographic records ...” (From the Fall 1993 update to the CONSER Editing Guide).

The current PCC mission reads:

In support of the need to provide access to information resources the Program will seek to cooperatively increase the timely availability of authoritative records created and maintained under accepted standards, to facilitate the cost-effective creation and use of these records, and to provide leadership in the national and international information community.

Both statements assume that catalog records will be created as part of the basic mission of CONSER. Is this assumption still valid?

CONSER began thirty years ago as a means of building a database of serial records that would support union listing. Participants converted their existing catalog cards and the program downloaded files from several large union lists in order to achieve a broad database of serials. A major effort at improving the coverage of serials in the CONSER database came in the 1980s with the Abstracting and Indexing Coverage Project. While most people think of this as a project to add 510 A&I data to CONSER records, it also served to identify and create records for serials that were not included in the CONSER database or that lacked ISSN. This was perhaps the major accomplishment of this project.

CONSER now has the opportunity to review the coverage of records and ISSN for electronic serials as we begin to work with serials management companies. While we look to such companies and others to help with in-house maintenance, it is CONSER that is best positioned to create the base records upon which such services and record sets are based. This is our area of expertise; it is what we do best.

At the same time, the PCC 3rd Task on Journals in Aggregator Databases is developing the specifications for a machine-derived record that would reside in the CONSER database. The task force is making this option available, but it is CONSER that will have to determine to what serials such records would be applied.

What kind of access is needed for electronic serials?

There are currently three basic ways in which libraries are providing access to electronic serials (and other electronic resources):

- Web lists of titles (these are often maintained by Serials Solutions or TDNet)
- Single-record approach (i.e., URLs added to records for print or other formats)
- Separate records for the electronic (produced by catalogers, purchased as record sets, or from Serial Solutions)

Many are using a combination of all of the above rather than any one approach. Libraries are being forced to make pragmatic decisions in order to provide access as fast as possible with diminishing staff resources. Thus, the popularity of the single-record approach and the use of Web lists.

Web lists are a form of access that is outside of the traditional library catalog. Recent discussions and comments at ALA indicate a growing desire to provide access via the catalog. One concern is that if we do not include these resources in the catalog, will students use the catalog at all? And will libraries be able to track and control the resources they have purchased?

If we assume that the mission statements above (both the original CONSER and the current PCC statement) are still valid, then the CONSER database must represent electronic versions of serials in order for CONSER to fulfill its mission. The question remains: **what kind of catalog access is needed?** Is the single record approach enough, or do we need separate records?

Following are some of the reasons for creating a record separate from the print:

- **Record sets.** The purchase of large collections of full text journals has made the single record approach difficult to maintain. Instead, many libraries would rather purchase record sets that can be added and dropped.
 - Services, such as Serials Solutions, provide a record for the electronic with all URLs attached.² CONSER's creation of these records would provide the base record for libraries, OCLC, or Serials Solutions who are creating record sets.
 - The PCC task force on journals in aggregations works with aggregators to provide individual record sets.
- **The potential disappearance of print.** Many libraries are considering whether or are beginning to cancel print subscriptions and it has been suggested that if this trend continues, some publishers may cease publication of the print. Whether or not this happens, it is becoming evident that the electronic is becoming the primary format. If this is the case, should not the record reflect the electronic?
- **In-house tracking.** OPAC records are used for many purposes aside from public access, such as acquisitions, holdings records, and ILL.
- **Linking services.** OPAC records can be useful in configuring linking services, such as SFX.

A big unknown at the moment is FRBR and its potential impact on catalogs. Current discussions seem to favor the creation of separate records at the manifestation level that

² Serials Solutions and aggregators who have provided record sets have done so by purchasing the CONSER database and using CONSER records. Most of the records are based on the print records, however.

could be pulled together for displays through use of authority records. Another possibility is a single format-neutral record that would include the format details at the holdings level. We really don't know what the future will bring but our CONSER FRBR task force is keeping a close eye on discussions and is hoping to contribute to them on behalf of continuing resources.

Below are reasons for retaining the single-record approach:

- It is fast and cheap
- It keeps the print and online holdings together on a single record
- It works well for free serials, such as government documents, that are not distributed by multiple aggregators
- It may be enough in some libraries to serve the needs of library patrons

The single-record approach will not be abandoned as a CONSER option. It will definitely be retained. The question for CONSER libraries is: **to what extent will it be used in the future as a long-term solution and what impact will this have on the CONSER database and its ability to provide coverage of electronic serials?**
Which serials should be included in the CONSER database?

The CONSER database has always reflected the holdings of its members, with additional records from the ISSN centers. Only during the A&I Coverage Project were records added outside of those contributed by CONSER members. Today, we are faced with large aggregations and packages of serials. There is much overlap of these serials and much variety in the value of these titles. In order to facilitate the creation of record sets by libraries, OCLC, or a serials management company, the suggestion has been made that records for any title covered by any type of aggregation should be included in the CONSER database. This was an assumption presented, but not fully discussed, at the CONSER At Large meeting in January 2003. It moves beyond the assumptions given in the original "Option B+" paper that CONSER members agreed to.

There are important differences in the types of eserial packages and aggregations. Those that include the entire serial and are published by or on behalf of the publisher tend to be more stable and can serve as a surrogate for the print. It is also relatively easy to catalog the serials in these packages because they are presented as discrete serials. Titles included in the large article-based databases, such as Lexus-Nexus and Proquest, are far less stable and there seems to be a growing trend for publishers to pull their titles from these aggregations. It is also difficult to catalog such titles because the serial does not exist as an entity. Records would have to be generated from the print or other format, if such records exist. Machine-generation of these records has been suggested.

What is reasonable and appropriate for CONSER? Should CONSER aim to assure complete coverage for all or only certain types of electronic serials in order to facilitate the creation of record sets and OPAC access?

Who will create these records?

There are various options for record creation, including:

- **Encouraging current CONSER catalogers to create the records.** It is hoped that for the major online journals, CONSER catalogers will create the aggregator-neutral record according to standards to be agreed upon in May. This could mean changing current local policies.
- **Increasing CONSER membership.** CONSER could actively recruit libraries that would be willing to contribute records for electronic serials.
- **Machine-generating records.** If there is no way in which a record can be created based on the online journal, there should be an easy means for creating the record from an existing print record. The PCC 3rd Task Force on Journals in Aggregator Databases is currently working on the standards for machine-derived records that would be included in the CONSER database. Such records could be created by OCLC or by a CONSER member using an OCLC-created macro.
- **Contracts or grants for money to create the records.** Perhaps those who will benefit most from a more complete set of CONSER records would consider funding the creation of records.

How will the records be maintained?

There are two important aspects of maintenance: bibliographic data and URLs. Maintaining bibliographic data is the routine work of CONSER. Often changes occur in conjunction with a change to the print, and the record for the electronic could be updated at the same time. The primary question is how to maintain records that were not created by CONSER participants (e.g., machine-derived) and may not be held by a CONSER library. Would records become out-dated over time and no longer useful?

The second issue, URLs, is much more complex. If records are created for serials in aggregator databases, and a URL is included on those records for each aggregation in which they are included, who will maintain this data if the title is later dropped from one or more aggregations? One suggestion is that the serials management companies notify OCLC when title coverage or the actual URL changes so that URLs can be added, removed, or changed. Initial discussions with the companies make this prospect seem quite unlikely. While OCLC can update URLs rather easily in many cases, it would still be the responsibility of CONSER members to notify OCLC of such changes.

There are currently multiple records in OCLC for each aggregation, each containing one or more URLs. Once decisions have been reached in May, these records will be collapsed and the URLs will be included on the one “aggregator-neutral” record. At least that is the initial thinking. However, two thirds of the respondents to the original CONSER survey said that they wanted no URLs in the record. In almost all cases they

would have to do in-house manipulation of the records and adding data to a clean record was easier. Others said that removing unwanted URLs was easier.

Those arguing on behalf of retaining/adding URLs for electronic serials point out the need for such URLs for serials other than standard journals, such as conference publications, which can be difficult to locate. The cooperative maintenance of such URLs is also an issue.

Here are some of the arguments given in favor of adding/retaining URLs in CONSER records:

- To help identify which aggregator the serial is contained in to facilitate creation of record sets
- To cooperatively maintain URLs for serials other than journals
- At least one URL is needed in all ISSN records for e-serials sent to Paris
- URLs are already in CONSER records and should not be removed now; they can always be removed later

Concerns about URLs include:

- They will need to be maintained
- They are most often stripped from records by those using the records and replaced with local URLs
- For large databases that come in many packages, there are many URLs associated with the database; an overall URL would have to be used that wouldn't be particularly useful

In considering these arguments, the type of package/aggregation becomes an important factor. Might the URLs be kept in the records for packages produced by or on behalf of the publisher (e.g., Synergy, Ingenta), but not for third party aggregations (e.g., ProQuest), unless maintenance by someone else was guaranteed (e.g., Firstsearch, where maintenance is handled by OCLC staff)? This might be the best short term solution to the problem as the URLs in the first category are the ones currently residing in the CONSER records.

Questions regarding your library's policies

- How important is OPAC access to electronic serials for your library?
- If considered important, how important is it to describe the electronic serial in a separate record?
- What is your library's current policy regarding the single-record approach and what do you expect it to be in the near-term?

- Is your library in the process of, or considering canceling the print versions of serials and, if so, how might this change current policies?
- Is your library using or planning to use record sets from Serials Solutions or TDNet (a new service not yet available) and if so, how might that change your current cataloging practices, if at all?

Questions regarding CONSER policy

- Should the CONSER database contain a record (apart from the print) for all titles in any form of aggregation? If not, which ones should CONSER focus on?
- What means do you think should be used to create such records?
- If machine-derived records are included in the CONSER database, what are the implications for future maintenance of these records?
- What should CONSER's policy be re URLs?